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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001448

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: OPPOSITION PARTIES TALK MERGER

REF: ABUJA 1324

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASON 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) In reporting President Obasanjo's formal announcement to seek reelection, reftel forecasted that Obasanjo's statement would force his opponents to respond. His political adversaries wasted little time making that prediction come true.

2. (C) Most major daily newspapers have been reporting that the APP and the yet-to-be-registered UNDP have been immersed in merger talks since Obasanjo declared his reelection bid. Significant progress has been made and the conclusion of a formal agreement appears imminent. It is possible that the NDP might also join the merger. If that were to happen, it would create a potentially significant rival to the ruling PDP in the North.

3. (C) According to Yaya Abubakar, a businessman, the merger might be formalized this week. As part of the deal, the existing party chairmen would resign, making way for a new person not publicly affiliated with any of the existing parties to emerge. The new chairman would likely be from the Southwest. The way then would be open for the new party to nominate a Presidential candidate from the North and a running mate from the Southeast. The simultaneous resignation of both (or all three) chairmen would create an impression of a merger of equals. But Abubakar said the entire deal could yet fall apart since each outgoing chairman was trying to retain influence by picking the (unified) successor chairman.

4. (C) Comment: A North/Southeast ticket would replicate the winning formula in past elections. Additionally, this partially responds to the noisy clamor from the Igboland for a President of their own. Dangling the Vice Presidency before them might attract Igbos who feel estranged from the Obasanjo Administration and do not see much hope about wresting the top job in the PDP since Vice President Atiku is a Northerner. These Igbos might see the Vice Presidency in 2003 as the stepping stone to the Presidency in 2007 or 2011. End Comment.

5. (C) Abubakar said that a recurring theme in the talks among APP, UNDP and NDP was the need for a younger man to assume the Presidency, someone under 50, someone such as himself. Abubakar offered that there was some support for airline owner Mohammed Buba Marwa, a retired brigadier general and former military governor of Borno and Lagos states. However, many discussants were sour on naming a former military leader. They feared the electorate would draw little distinction between them and the PDP if they tapped another retired military officer to face former General Obasanjo. However, Marwa was still a possibility as his popularity in Lagos intrigued many of those in the merger talks who want to hit Obasanjo, a Yoruba, hard in his own electoral backyard.

6. (C) Comment: Some Northern powerbrokers are considering trying to nominate an elderly Igbo (e.g., Alex Ekwueme) or southern minority leader (e.g., C.C. Onoh) as the Presidential candidate while bringing in a young Northerner to run things behind the scenes as Vice President. End Comment.

7. (C) During a May 1 conversation with PolCouns, National Assembly Member Farouk Lawal confirmed that the President's opponents have been talking feverishly. Lawal, allied with Speaker Ghali Na'Abba as an Obasanjo foe within the PDP, stated the opposition had been stymied by its inability to find a credible consensus figure. Stoked by the President's reelection declaration, sentiment for unity in the opposition was at its crest. Lawal predicted opposition forces had only a few weeks to select a candidate and

execute the formal merger. After that, centrifugal forces of regionalism, religion and personal ambition would begin to supercede the mutual opposition to Obasanjo, Lawal remarked. He added that already Obasanjo operatives were trying to sow discord among the participants in the merger talks. Lawal asserted that if the parties do formally merge, there likely would be a mass exodus of Obasanjo opponents from the PDP to the new creation.

18. (C) Comment: That the parties have moved so quickly in the merger talks illustrates the significance of the opposition to an Obasanjo second term. However, the fine points still pending to consummate the deal show the difficulty in fusing divergent interests into an ABOP -- Anybody But Obasanjo Party. With former Head of State Babangida second-in-command Augustus Aikhomu leading the UNDP team, this development seems to have IBB's blessing, if not his behind the scenes involvement. We heard from one source that IBB was orchestrating this amalgam not to fight Obasanjo but to form a party big enough to thwart former Head of State Buhari's attempt to steam-roll the APP nomination. Buhari's dislike of IBB is legendary, and IBB clearly has more to fear from a Buhari first term than from Obasanjo's retention.

19. (C) Regardless of the primary intention behind the merger, it could pose a serious threat to Obasanjo if it jells and selects a formidable candidate. The claim that the prospective party wants a new face and wants to break from the past rings hollow. The manner in which the party is being formed and the attempt of a select group of powerbrokers to pick the presidential candidate smack of traditional Nigerian politics. Basically, this is a move by Northern politicians, stung by what they feel has been Obasanjo's disregard for their station and their support in the 1999 election, to regain control of national politics. In the end, with so many of the established players involved and assuming their familiar roles as backroom bargainers, this attempted merger appears to be the same old card game played on a refurbished table. End comment.

JETER